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SUBJECT: FRENCH NATIONAL AVIAN INFLUENZA EXERCISE - "THANK GOD IT
WAS ONLY AN EXERCISE...."

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1. (SBU) Summary: At the request of French authorities, on April 24-25 Embassy participated in their National Avian Influenza Exercise, together with the Prime Minister's Office responsible for security coordination (SGDN), numerous ministries, international organizations (OIE, WHO, EU, FAO, and ECDC, the EU CDC equivalent), as well as several other Paris-based embassies. While the GOF will not provide results before end-May, from the Embassy's narrow window on the exercise, it highlighted dramatically the need for thorough multi-dimensional planning to cope with a pandemic. The opening exercise scenario presented rapidly developing chaos in a fictional SE Asian country once a mutated H5virus developed human-to-human transmissibility. Shortly thereafter infected airline passengers embarked for destinations across the globe, including in U.S. and European cities. On the second exercise day - fictionally weeks later - the pandemic had blossomed to infect millions worldwide. Even hyper-prepared countries like France suffered in a downward pandemic spiral. End Summary.

Ambitious Exercise

2. (SBU) Following two postponements, on April 24-25 the French government conducted an extensive 'tabletop' exercise to test the French National Avian Influenza Plan (www.grippeaviaire.gouv.fr), to train government officials in crisis management, and to evaluate their performance. Several embassies (UK, Germany, Sweden, Luxembourg, and Australia, beside our own) were included to help test the Foreign Ministry's role in the National Plan. The exercise was the product of elaborate preparation. In advance of receiving instructions, those participating provided their own AI emergency plans and contact information to GOF authorities. In addition, planners from SGDN met with all participants to provide exercise guidance and possible scenario themes, while preserving the release

of the detailed scenarios reserved for the exercise. Kicking off the exercise on April 24, a paramilitary gendarme dropped-off at the Embassy DVDs containing the actual exercise scenarios.

13. (SBU) In addition to the background DVDs, the exercise consisted of a flood (every fifteen minutes) of SGDN-supplied information such as diplomatic notes, French ministerial notices, newspaper articles, television broadcast transcripts, Internet chat, emails, as well as phone calls - intended to inform and disorient at the same time. Participants reacted to pieces of information related to their part in the pandemic exercise. Although the Embassy's point-of-contact was with the AI crisis cell at the MFA, we had occasional contact with other embassies participating wanting to know how we were 'gaming' our responses to Foreign Ministry queries.

Deadly Scenarios....

14. (SBU) The first day scenario depicted a time when the H5N1 virus had mutated into the H5N2 virus with human-to-human transmissibility. Sickchikie, a fictional textile and high technologies exporting country of 90 million inhabitants bordering Vietnam (in place of the Gulf of Tonkin), provided the genesis of the new pathogenic strain. After several cases of infected humans in that country turned into a larger group of 200, the WHO announced a world caution corresponding to phase five (5) of its AI plan. Almost immediately, expatriates and Sickchickie nationals sought to flee the country. Despite efforts to retard the progress of the disease, passengers on aircraft to transportation hubs on several continents developed avian influenza symptoms. Meanwhile, other sources related tales of a panicked French population as parents removed children from schools, did not themselves go to work, and pharmacies and grocery stores quickly sold out of merchandise.

15. (SBU) By day two of the exercise - hypothetically several weeks later -- the scenario had become grave. We moved to French AI plan

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level six (6) - full-scale pandemic. Millions of human beings around the globe were infected and mortality rates of victims were high: Greater than two percent in those countries with limited medicines and health care systems. The scenario DVD for day two showed long clips of mass interments. Many financial services had ceased to function, as did sanitation services and private sector delivery of goods and services. In France, the health system was severely taxed, especially due to medical practitioner parents of children deciding to tend to their children at home rather than to flu victims in hospitals. Security services functioned but were strained. We were bombarded with reports of looting, especially with vigilantes seeking medicine. The Internet served to provide information but also to disseminate rumors.

Quickly Overwhelmed...

16. (SBU) In a post-exercise debrief with other participating embassies conducted by SGDN, all noted the intensity and rapidity with which the crisis unfolded and described the sense of immediate 'stress and helplessness' felt by players. While the scenario set the stage, responding to the constant stream of information from exercise organizers redoubled the feeling of crisis. Although we exclusively communicated with the MFA's crisis cell, the organizers in the post-exercise debrief accepted that in reality the Embassy would work directly with GOF contacts in the ministries, law enforcement agencies, and local defense forces than route requests through the MFA at every juncture.

17. (SBU) At the same debriefing, representatives of several embassies mentioned that transportation issues, e.g., the treatment of aircraft carrying possible AI infectees, had stymied gamers. Tamiflu presented numerous problems for third country embassy exercise participants. France, for example, wants to be in a position to be able to dispense Tamiflu to each of its nationals, worldwide. Other countries have limited access to Tamiflu. One

third-country consular officer mentioned to U.S. officers at the debriefing that his government's guidance to its citizens is that they secure their own, personal stocks of Tamiflu. However, he said that it was unreasonable since private citizens have difficulty obtaining personal stocks of the medicine, especially without a prescription. This was important (at least for exercise purposes) since Tamiflu treatment reduced the exercise AI mortality rates. (It was very clear from the scenario documents, too, that those countries accessing anti-viral medicines and possessing good medical services had lower mortality rates from the fictional virus than those, mostly poorer countries.) European embassies at the debriefing raised challenges associated with dealing with the EU in the AI pandemic situation. We learned at the debriefing that the EU is planning its own AI exercise soon.

Lessons?

¶8. (SBU) The speed with which a highly pathogenic AI pandemic crisis could erupt underscored for Embassy participants the importance of having a crisis-reaction infrastructure in place early. Awareness on the part of key mission elements of what roles they would play in an actual crisis would also be important to weathering a crisis. Physical infrastructure might require some changes, too, at an Embassy in which only critical personnel reported to work, possibly a place for an Embassy crisis cell. Although Embassy's responses to GOF requests for information and policy were creative and - we thought - mostly realistic, we did not need to contact Washington agencies for guidance. But in a real emergency, we would need to be in immediate contact with experts in DHS, TSA, HHS, State, Defense, and other departments.

¶9. (SBU) Embassy exercise participants envisioned situations in

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which it could become difficult to assure security of all Embassy facilities, particularly annexes of the chancery, due to breakdowns in civil order occasioned by a full-scale pandemic. We hypothesized that the Embassy staff could very well become degraded due to sickness and physical inability to report to duty, for a variety of reasons such as transportation disruptions. At one point in the exercise, Embassy participants sought reinforcement of Embassy facilities by French gendarmes following the discovery of an Internet rumor that the Embassy had stockpiled antiviral medicine in the off-site Consular Section. Embassy exercise participants as well as exercise participants from other countries' embassies experienced the sense of being quickly overwhelmed by demands from their citizens for assistance.

¶10. (SBU) Comment: What was disquieting to participants in this exercise was that from what we have read about avian influenza, the scenarios - the outbreak of the human-to-human H5 mutation and the subsequent, rapid descent into worldwide chaos and death - did not strike us as wildly exaggerated. In the 'warm' de-briefing by participants from different Paris-based embassies, the one refrain was, "We hope to never have to deal with such a crisis." The practical result of the exercise was that it served to focus the minds of the participants on the need for preparation. Post Management will assure that all members of the Tri-Mission Avian Influenza Working Group watch the Exercise Scenario DVDs. Embassy will report official exercise results as soon as available. End comment.

STAPLETON